DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 458 554   CS 014 524

AUTHOR   Wren, Sebastian
TITLE   Reading and the Three Cueing Systems. Topics in Early
                Reading Coherence.
INSTITUTION   Southwest Educational Development Lab., Austin, TX.
PUB DATE   2001-00-00
NOTE   5p.
AVAILABLE FROM Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 211 E. 7th
                St., Austin, TX 78701-3281. Tel: 800-476-6861 (Toll Free).
                Web site: http://www.sedl.org. For full text:
                http://www.sedl.org/reading/topics/cueing.html.
PUB TYPE   Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE   MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS   *Cues; *Decoding (Reading); Models; Phoneme Grapheme
                Correspondence; *Reading; *Reading Comprehension; *Reading
                Skills
IDENTIFIERS   Southwest Educational Development Laboratory

ABSTRACT
                According to the Three Cueing Systems model of reading,
there are three cues that every good reader depends upon to decode words in
running text. The first and most important cue is semantics--some words make
sense in the context of the text and other words do not. The second cue is
syntax--some words are semantically appropriate but can be ruled out because
of syntactic constraints. The third and least important cue, according to
this view, is grapho-phonemic or letter-sound information. The Three Cueing
Systems model suggests that when a child is reading running text and comes
upon a word that is difficult to read, the child should first try to guess
what the word is based upon the context, then try to guess what the word is
based upon syntax, and finally, if the other two systems fail to provide an
appropriate word, the child should focus on the letters of the word and try
to "sound it out." The Three Cueing Systems model can be contrasted with a
research-based model which suggests that the first cue a child should focus
on is the grapho-phonemic information. After the child has used the letters
to "sound out" the word, the child should pay attention to the semantic and
syntactic information to determine if the word makes sense in that context.
Evidence for this alternative model is compelling. However, a prerequisite to
mature reading comprehension is fluid and automatic decoding skills. (NKA)

Reading and the Three Cueing Systems

By Sebastian Wren

Topics in Early Reading Coherence

Southwest Educational Development Laboratory

2

Reading and the Three Cueing Systems

Sebastian Wren, Ph.D.

Teachers everywhere are familiar with the Three Cueing Systems model of reading, and influences of this model can be found in many of the most popular reading programs and instructional approaches, such as Reading Recovery and Guided Reading. According to this model, there are three cues that every good reader depends upon to decode words in running text. The first and most important cue is semantics – there are some words that make sense in the context of the text and other words that do not. Supporters of this model claim that good readers make use of contextual information to "guess" or "predict" each word in a passage of running text. The second cue is syntax – some words are semantically appropriate but can be ruled out because of syntactic constraints. The third and least important

cue, according to this view, is grapho-phonemic or letter-sound information. According to the Three Cueing Systems model, the grapho-phonemic cue is only used to "confirm" predictions that are made based on semantics and syntax.

This model was originally popularized by advocates of the Whole Language movement, and has primarily been supported by evidence from the types of mistakes that people make as they read (called "Miscue Analysis"). Advocates of the model claim (quite incorrectly) that skilled readers make many mistakes as they read (miscues) but are not aware of them because they are not semantically significant. In fact, research has shown that good readers almost never make mistakes when reading – studies of college students reading college level text have shown that the modal number of errors committed in a one-page passage of text is zero.

The Three Cueing Systems model suggests that when a child is reading running text and comes upon a word that is difficult to read, the child should first try to guess what the word is based upon the context (including pictures, if there are any). Secondly, the child should try to guess what the word is based upon syntax (is it a verb, a noun, etc...), and finally, if the other two cueing systems fail to provide an appropriate word, the child should focus on the letters of the word and try to "sound it out." (Even then, some would suggest that the child should only look at the first letter of the word, and use that information to make a more "educated guess")

3

Instructional strategies that have arisen as a result of this model include covering up key words so children have to practice using context clues to guess words, and encouraging children who are struggling with a word to look at the picture and think about what word may be appropriate. These instructional strategies would be appropriate if reading was truly a "psycholinguistic guessing game" as it has been described by proponents of the Three Cueing Systems model, but as we will see, reading is anything but a guessing game.

Research-based Model

The Three Cueing Systems model can be contrasted with a research-based model which suggests that the first cue a child should focus on is the grapho-phonemic information – the letters in the word offer by far the best information about that word's identity. After the child has used the letters to "sound out" the word, the child should pay attention to the semantic and syntactic information to determine if the word makes sense in that context.

The distinction, then, between these models is the role that semantics and syntax play in reading. In the Three Cueing Systems model, semantics and syntax are of primary importance for decoding or identifying individual words. In the alternative, research-based model, semantics and syntax do not play a significant role in the identification of words, but instead are important for the comprehension or "making sense" of text.

Evidence for research-based model

Evidence for this alternative model is quite compelling. For example, there is a phenomenon called the Stroop Effect that demonstrates that, even when we consciously try to ignore words, we can not help but decode them (see sidebar). In this demonstration, words are presented in isolation without any semantic or syntactic cues, and yet readers find they can not help but decode the words.

For the skilled reader, word decoding is extremely rapid and automatic, and the decoding mechanism can not be deactivated. "Guessing" and "predicting" words, on the other hand, is deliberate, slow, clumsy, and usually inaccurate. Research has repeatedly shown that skilled readers, given unlimited time to ponder, can only accurately predict one in ten content words in running text. However, as stated earlier, most skilled readers read a passage of text with 100 percent accuracy – making absolutely no mistakes. Furthermore, skilled readers decode words in an average of 180 milliseconds – that's less than one-fifth of a second. There is no way that skilled readers could read by "guessing" or "predicting" the words in the passage; that would be too slow and inaccurate. For
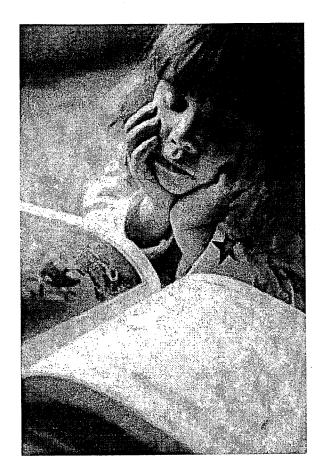

Stroop Effect

Ignore what each word says – just name the color each word is written in as quickly as you can.

RED

BLUE

YELLOW

ORANGE

GREEN

Proficient readers find it difficult to ignore the word and just name the color. Word decoding is so rapid and automatic that it can not be "turned off."

Ironically, it is often suggested that the child who struggles to "sound-out" a word is *over*-depending on grapho-phonemic information, and that the child should be discouraged from paying too much attention to the letters and words on the page. The findings of reading research could not be clearer on this point – when a child is struggling to decode a word, instructing that child to "guess" what the word is, or to use information from illustrations to try to figure out what the word might be steers the child's attention in exactly the wrong direction. The word itself is the single best source of information, and that is where the child's attention should be focused. Poor readers "guess" – good readers decode, and then ask themselves, "Does what I am reading make sense to me?"

Summary

Reading, then, from this research-based model can be summed up very concisely. A skilled reader makes use of the grapho-phonemic information provided by the text to decode each word (which is done rapidly and automatically). As the text is decoded, the reader uses semantic and syntactic information to comprehend the decoded text.

In this model, semantics and syntax are definitely essential elements in reading comprehension, but they do not play a significant role in decoding individual words. Semantics and syntax are essential elements of language comprehension, and are therefore they are essential to reading comprehension. However, a prerequisite to mature reading comprehension is fluid and automatic decoding skills.

skilled readers, decoding is so fast and automatic, it happens pre-consciously – before a skilled reader can consciously think about each word, the reader's grapho-phonemic decoding mechanism has already translated it.

Only poor readers use multiple cues to decode

Further evidence to support this model stems from research which has repeatedly shown that only *poor* readers attempt to decode words using semantic and syntactic cues. Good readers are able to decode words quickly and automatically without any dependence on semantic or syntactic cues, but poor readers struggle with each word and try to guess what each word is based upon context.

For further reading on the Three Cueing Systems, see the recent article published by Marilyn Jager Adams (http://www.readbygrade3.com/3cue.htm)

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
National Library of Education (NLE)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

ERIC

NOTICE

REPRODUCTION BASIS

☐ This document is covered by a signed "Reproduction Release (Blanket) form (on file within the ERIC system), encompassing all or classes of documents from its source organization and, therefore, does not require a "Specific Document" Release form.

☑ This document is Federally-funded, or carries its own permission to reproduce, or is otherwise in the public domain and, therefore, may be reproduced by ERIC without a signed Reproduction Release form (either "Specific Document" or "Blanket").

EFF-089 (9/97)